

Agriculture

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Overview

Delta agricultural lands were “reclaimed” through construction of levees and drainage of the marshy islands of the area. In less than 100 years, from 1850 to 1930, hundreds of thousands of acres of land went into agricultural production due in large part to the high productivity of the peat soils in the central Delta and the mineral soils in the higher elevations. The farmers and landowners represented a cross section of the new Americans—Slavs, Dutch, German, English, and others. Many groups of immigrants first labored in the fields, then went on to become landowners or tenant farmers including Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and Hindus.

Early crops were grains, fruits, and vegetables marketed in the nearby cities. Early specialty crops included wheat, barley, beans, and potatoes. Later asparagus, sugar beets, tomatoes, and celery grew in popularity. Currently, the Delta counties raise a variety of crops including grains, fruits, field crops, nuts, seeds, pasture and alfalfa, wine grapes, vegetables, olives and blueberries.

In the recent past, thousands of acres of agricultural lands were developed for residential and other urban uses. Between 1990 and 2004, approximately 39,000 acres of agricultural land was converted to urban and other uses in the larger Delta-Suisun Marsh area (*Status and Trends of Delta-Suisun Service*, California Department of Water Resources, May 2007). New markets to sell crops, including new crop uses such as the conversion to fuel sources, will continue to keep agriculture an important land use in the Delta and California.

Agricultural lands within the Delta are highly productive and well suited for ongoing agricultural operations. Delta counties have recognized the value of the agriculture economy and have clearly delineated Delta lands for long-term agricultural use. Local governments use specific land use tools to protect the agricultural way of life within the Delta. These tools are the inclusion of agricultural elements in their general plans, the adoption of urban limit lines, the establishment of buffers between agriculture and other approved uses, the adoption of Right-to-Farm ordinances, full support of the Williamson Act programs, the control of land subdivision and land use types allowed within agricultural areas, the establishment of minimum agricultural parcel sizes, and the establishment of limits on General Plan land use designation changes. Also pursuant to the Act, to the extent that any of the requirements specified in this Land Use and Resource Management Plan are in conflict, nothing in this Plan shall deny the right of the landowner to continue the agricultural use of the land.

Some agricultural lands provide rich seasonal wildlife habitat. Thousands of acres of agricultural lands are flooded after harvest and provide feeding and resting areas for resident and migratory birds and other wildlife. This practice of seasonal flooding helps maximize the wildlife values of agricultural areas and lessen opportunities for agricultural pests.

Goals

To support long-term viability of agriculture and to discourage inappropriate development of agricultural lands.

Support the continued capability for agricultural operations to diversify and remain flexible to meet changing market demands and crop production technology. Promote the ability for agriculture operations to change the crops or commodities produced to whatever is most economically viable at the time. Support the use of new crop production technologies that keep Delta agricultural operations competitive and economically sustainable.

The priority land use of areas in the Primary Zone shall be oriented toward agriculture and open space. If agriculture is no longer appropriate, land uses that protect other beneficial uses of Delta resources and that would not adversely affect agriculture on surrounding lands or the viability or cost of levee maintenance, may be permitted. If temporarily taken out of agriculture production due to lack of adequate water supply or water quality, the land shall remain reinstatable to agriculturally-oriented uses for the future.

Policies

P-1.

Support and encourage agriculture in the Delta as a key element in the State's economy and in providing the food supply needed to sustain the increasing population of the State, the Nation, and the world.

P-2.

Conversion of land to non-agriculturally-oriented uses should occur first where productivity and agricultural values are lowest.

P-3.

Promote recognition of the Delta as a place by educating individuals about the rich agricultural heritage, the unique recreational resources, the biological diversity, and the ongoing value of maintaining a healthy agricultural economy in the Delta.

P-4.

Support agricultural programs that maintain economic viability and increase agricultural income in accordance with market demands, including but not limited to wildlife-friendly farming, conservation tillage and non-tillage.

P-5.

Local governments shall encourage implementation of the necessary plans and ordinances to: maximize agricultural parcel size; reduce subdivision of agricultural lands; protect agriculture and related activities; protect agricultural land from conversion to non-agriculturally-oriented uses. An optimum package of regulatory and incentive programs could include: (1) an urban limit line; (2) minimum parcel size consistent with local agricultural practices and needs; (3) strict subdivision regulations regarding subdivision of agricultural lands to ensure that subdivided lands will continue to contain agriculturally-oriented land uses; (4) require adequate buffers between agricultural and non-agricultural land uses particularly residential development outside but adjacent to the Primary Zone; (5) an agriculture element of the general plan; (6) a Right-to-Farm ordinance; and (7) a conservation easement program.

P-6.

Encourage acquisition of agricultural conservation easements from willing sellers as mitigation for projects within each county. Promote use of environmental mitigation in agricultural areas only when it is consistent and compatible with ongoing agricultural operations and when developed in appropriate locations designated on a countywide or Deltawide habitat management plan.

P-7.

Encourage management of agricultural lands which maximize wildlife habitat seasonally and year-round, through techniques such as fall and winter flooding, leaving crop residue, creation of mosaic of small grains and flooded areas, wildlife friendly farming, controlling predators, controlling poaching, controlling public access, and others.

P-8.

Encourage the protection of agricultural areas, recreational resources and sensitive biological habitats, and the reclamation of those areas from the destruction caused by inundation.

P-9.

Support agricultural tourism and value-added agricultural production as a means of maintaining the agricultural economy of the Delta.